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## Rilke and God<sup>1</sup>

Robert Vilain, University of Bristol

### I

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran theologian and anti-Nazi dissident incarcerated by the Gestapo in Tegel from April 1943, was encouraged to read Rilke for spiritual inspiration during his imprisonment. Bonhoeffer noted that the poet had been no help at all: ‘Mit Rilke [konnte ich] gar nichts anfangen’, he wrote to his parents, describing him to a friend as ‘ausgesprochen ungesund’.<sup>2</sup> What is surprising about this is not the fact that the sincere Christian Bonhoeffer found no spiritual or theological solace in Rilke, but that anyone might have supposed that Rilke was likely to offer him any such thing. Many do suppose this, however, and despite the fact that Rilke was not himself a Christian, his work continues to this day to be treated as a potential source of spiritual support for believers. John Mood’s *Rilke on Death and Other Oddities* lists in an appendix a host of popular works on spirituality, healing and religious self-help that adduce Rilke, quite inappropriately, as Mood points out.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this article appeared in German under the title ‘Rilkes “Bezug zu Gott”’ in *Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft*, 33 (2016), 163-76, and I am grateful to the editors for permission to rework and extend that publication here.

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Werke*, ed. Eberhard Bethge et al., 17+2 vols (Gütersloh: Christian Kaiser, 1986-99), VIII: *Widerstand und Ergebung*, ed. Christian Gremmels et al. (1998), pp. 93 and 214 (letters of 4 June and 28 November 1943).

<sup>3</sup> John Mood, *Rilke on Death and Other Oddities* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2006), pp. 81-83.

Rilke's position on Christianity (as opposed to religion or spirituality in general) is widely considered by more specialist readers to have been at best sceptical, often overtly hostile. This was certainly true of the period in 1912-1913 when, visiting Spain, he wrote of undergoing a phase of 'beinahe rabiate Antichristlichkeit'.<sup>4</sup> There is a widespread assumption that the era of modernism in general, and Rilke in particular, had 'discarded' their Christian heritage, stripping religion entirely of its traditional meaning and value.<sup>5</sup> Writing on Rilke and Augustine, Robert Halsall is careful to reduce almost to zero the specifically religious component in the poet's reception of the great *Doctor gratiae*. Setting him within the 'crisis produced by the ideas of Nietzsche, the rise of positivism and scientific materialism, and the alienated condition of humanity', Halsall likens him to Broch, Kafka, and Musil: 'for these writers and poets, engagement with the tradition of Christian and Jewish mystical and religious thought, in particular with Meister Eckhart, Angelus Silesius, Augustine and Kierkegaard, was a means of addressing the problems of autonomy and individuality, spirituality and materialism, which characterize this cultural crisis'.<sup>6</sup>

However, one should not write off belief entirely in the era following God's famous demise. In 1978 August Stahl noted in his *Rilke Kommentar* that Rilke formulated his 'Botschaft von der Herrlichkeit des Lebens nicht nur gegen, sondern auch in enger

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<sup>4</sup> Rilke and Marie von Thurn und Taxis, *Briefwechsel*, ed. by Ernst Zinn, 2 vols (Zürich and Wiesbaden: Max Niehans und Rokitansky and Insel, 1951), I, 245 (= BW MTT; letter of 17December 1912).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Johannes Wich-Schwarz, *Transformation of Language and Religion in Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Lang, 2011), here p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Halsall, 'Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926)', in *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, ed. by Karla Pollmann et al. (Oxford University Press, 2013), 1661-63 (pp. 1662-63).

Anlehnung an die christliche Weltdeutung',<sup>7</sup> of which he had a detailed knowledge from childhood and school. Rilke may have tried to distance himself from his mother's sentimental piety, but he always remained grateful to Professor Franz Horaček, the 'liebenswürdiger Gelehrter' who had been responsible for religious instruction in the academy in St Pölten.<sup>8</sup> And for one supposedly lacking faith, Rilke wrote surprisingly consistently on overtly religious themes: the *Christus-Visionen* that date from 1896-98 were followed quickly by *Das Stundenbuch*, written 1899-1903; the *Geschichten vom Lieben Gott* appeared in 1900; the fifteen poems of *Das Marien-Leben* were written in January 1912 at Schloß Duino. The *Neue Gedichte*, of course, include many poems on biblical themes from the Old and New Testaments, on the prophets and the saints, on the crucifixion, on cathedral architecture, on the church calendar (such as the procession in Ghent for the Feast of the Assumption) – and on non-Christian figures such as Mohammed and Buddha, too. There are many free-standing poems on religious themes, such as 'Himmelfahrt Mariae' and 'Auferweckung des Lazarus' (both written in January 1913 in Ronda during the very visit to Spain that prompted Rilke's bout of rabid anti-Christianity) or 'Emmaus', 'Christi Höllenfahrt' and 'Sankt Christofferus' (written in Paris in April 1913, shortly after his return).<sup>9</sup> The numerous poems about angels span his whole career.

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<sup>7</sup> August Stahl, *Rilke – Kommentar zum lyrischen Werk* (Munich: Winkler, 1978), p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Rilke, *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter: Mit den Briefen von Franz Xaver Kappus*, ed. by Erich Unglaub (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2019), p. 12 (= BjD; letter of 17 February 1903).

<sup>9</sup> KA II, 44-45, 47-48, 55, 57, and 58-59. Erich Unglaub offers a sensitive reading of Rilke's changing attitudes to the Christ figure in his poetry from 1893 to the poems of *Das Marien-Leben*. He concludes that the most overt anti-Christian statements are found in letters and unpublished works and that 'in den von Rilke selbst veröffentlichten lyrischen Texten herrscht meist atmosphärische Unbestimmtheit', which means that Rilke's critique of Christ

Rilke was keenly interested in religious architecture, art and iconography. He also read widely in theological texts – including the *Flos Sanctorum*, a hagiographic collection by Pedro de Ribadeneira – and had a detailed knowledge of many, including works by Augustine, who features frequently between the Rodin monograph of 1902 and Marie von Thurn und Taxis’ last ever letter to Rilke in September 1926.<sup>10</sup> Rilke wrote to his publisher Anton Kippenberg in 1911, at a time when his own creativity was very problematic, ‘Zu meinen späten Abendbeschäftigungen gehören die herrlichen Confessionen des heil. Augustinus’, putting in some considerable effort to study them properly: ‘ich lese sie jetzt lateinisch mit dem unbeschreiblich erbärmlichen französischen Text nebenan’.<sup>11</sup> Kippenberg sent him a copy of the 1905 Hertling translation, ‘dieses herrliche Buch’, which he passed to his mother ‘im Gedächtnis der gemeinsam darüber verbrachten Stunde’.<sup>12</sup> Dissatisfied with

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as mediator was barely present in his lifetime: ‘Die Christus-Figur in Rilkes Lyrik’, in *Jesus in der Literatur: Tradition, Transformation, Tendenzen: Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. by Yvonne Nilges (Heidelberg: Winter, 2016), pp. 177-90 (p. 189).

<sup>10</sup> Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1907 bis 1914*, ed. by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Leipzig: Insel, 1933), p. 167 (letter of 12 January 1912 to Manon zu Solms-Laubach); KA III, 405; BW MTT, II, 884.

<sup>11</sup> Rilke, *Briefwechsel mit Anton Kippenberg*, ed. by Ingeborg Schnack and Renate Scharffenberg, 2 vols (Frankfurt/M and Leipzig: Insel, 1995), I, 261. See also August Stahl, ‘“Salus tua ergo sum”: Rilke liest die “Confessiones” des heiligen Augustinus’, in *Augustinus: Spuren und Spiegelungen seines Denkens*, ed. Norbert Fischer (Hamburg: Meiner, 2009), pp. 229-52.

<sup>12</sup> *Die Bekenntnisse des heiligen Augustinus: Buch I-X*, trans. by Georg von Hertling (Freiburg: Herder, 1905). See also Constance Dittrich, ‘Augustinus und sein Nachwirken’, in

the French text, he began a translation of his own, completing the first 18 chapters by 1915.<sup>13</sup> Quoting Augustine to Magda von Hattingberg, he notes simply ‘er hat *wirklich* recht’.<sup>14</sup>

It would be possible to multiply many times the evidence both for Rilke’s lack of faith and for his recurrent and detailed engagement with religious subject-matter across his whole poetic career. How, if at all, are these ostensibly contradictory approaches to be reconciled, however? It is clear that Rilke was not a Christian and had no patience with any version of religion that engaged Christ as a mediator between humanity and a divinity. But did Rilke believe in God? And if so, what form did this belief take? Stahl’s recognition of Rilke’s stance being constructed ‘in enger Anlehnung an die christliche Weltdeutung’ is certainly true, but it may not go far enough in acknowledging the lasting importance to Rilke of an engagement with a God that went beyond the use of biblical and other religious imagery and rhetoric only as ‘echoes of tradition’ or the ‘de-spiritualized deployment of religious iconography’, or as ‘ein poetischer Vorwand’.<sup>15</sup> This essay does not propose to reveal Rilke as a closet Christian, but it takes more seriously than is usual nowadays the idea that he did in fact have a form of religious belief that would be recognizable to many who consider themselves people of faith.

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*Augustinus: Ein Lehrer des Abendlandes. Einführung und Dokumente*, ed. by Constance Dittrich, Norbert Fischer and Erich Naab (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2009), p. 93.

<sup>13</sup> Unpublished in Rilke’s lifetime, but now in Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Ernst Zinn (Frankfurt/M: Insel, 1955-1997), VII, ed. Walter Simon and Karin Waiss, pp. 926-61.

<sup>14</sup> Rilke, *Briefwechsel mit Magda von Hattingberg ‘Benvenuta’*, ed. by Ingeborg Schnack and Renate Scharffenberg (Frankfurt /M: Insel, 2000), p. 89 (letter of 15 February 1914).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Einführung’, in Norbert Fischer, *‘Gott’ in der Dichtung Rainer Maria Rilkes* (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 2014), p. 28.

## II

Although the theme of Rilke's relationship to God is an obvious one, indeed one that leaps out as central to an understanding of Rilke the writer and Rilke the man, there is relatively little modern scholarship on it. An honourable exception is a 2014 volume edited by Norbert Fischer, which contains nineteen tightly-argued essays.<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that the topic has been ignored, of course, merely that existing studies are often out-of-date or focus on material limited in scope. The years immediately following Rilke's death in 1926 saw a particularly dense concentration of work on the nature of his religion and belief, often predicated on the assumption that a poet writing so often about God and the Bible, and often in such lofty tones, must be regarded as a kind of latter-day prophet. Eva Wernick was quick off the mark in a lecture on *Das Stundenbuch*, which she read as the spiritual confessions of a poet she calls 'homo religiosus'.<sup>17</sup> There were studies of his relationship with Russian Orthodoxy and attempts to annex Rilke for both Catholicism and Protestantism.<sup>18</sup> The title of a study by Gertrud Bäumer, *Ich kreise um Gott*, reveals its position clearly: for her Rilke is '[die] allen vorangeschrittene religiöse Persönlichkeit des 20. Jahrhunderts' and she sees his God as 'an

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<sup>16</sup> See previous note.

<sup>17</sup> Eva Wernick, *Die Religiosität des Stundenbuches von Rilke* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1926), p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Lilly Zarncke, 'Rainer Maria Rilkes Frömmigkeit und ihre Beziehungen zu russischem und römisch-katholischem Christentum', *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie*, 11 (1933-34), 225-97; Konrad Zähringer, 'Die Religiosität Rainer Maria Rilkes, christlich gesehen', *Benediktinische Monatsschrift zur Pflege religiösen und geistigen Lebens*, 19 (1937), 127-45, 195-203 and 273-83; Karl Kindt, 'Rilke und wir Evangelischen', *Zeitwende*, 13 (1937), 449-56.

unequivocal transcendent creator'.<sup>19</sup> Other commentators elided the issue of belief and faith into a consideration of the extent to which Rilke can be thought of a mystic (benefiting, as Eudo Mason suggests, from the large number of contradictory and mutually incompatible ways of defining mysticism).<sup>20</sup> This tendency had begun as early as 1912, with an essay in *Logos* by Feodor Steppuhn.<sup>21</sup> Some, such as Fritz Klatt, wrote of Rilke as if he were some kind of modern Messiah or contemporary Saint, 'ein vorbildlicher Mensch', '[einer der] beispielhaften Meister unseres Lebens, die wir verehren und nach denen wir uns richten'.<sup>22</sup> Writers such as Fritz Dehn and Albert Schäfer saw coded or symbolic references to a Divinity in much of Rilke's writing and regarded 'das Leben', 'das Hiesige', 'die Welt' as conduits or vehicles for something essentially transcendent. Dehn notoriously wrote that the Angel of the *Elegien* is 'Im Grunde [...] ein Pseudonym Gottes' – albeit an ambiguous one, bearing traces of the demonic<sup>23</sup> – and Schäfer suggested: 'bei Rilke erscheint die religiöse

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<sup>19</sup> Eudo C. Mason, *Rilke's Apotheosis: A Survey of Representative Recent Publications on the Work and Life of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1938), p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Hans-Rudolf Müller, *Rilke als Mystiker* (Berlin: Fruche, 1935); Mason, *Rilke's Apotheosis*, pp. 11-13.

<sup>21</sup> Feodor Steppuhn, 'Die Tragödie des mystischen Bewußtseins', *Logos*, 3 (1912), 164-91. Hans Ehrenberg calls Rilke 'einen mystischen Robinson': 'Rilkes Mystik', *Die christliche Welt*, 32 (1922), cols 601-03 (col. 602).

<sup>22</sup> Fritz Klatt, *Rainer Maria Rilke: Sein Auftrag in heutiger Zeit* (Berlin: Lambert Schneider, 1936), quoted by Mason, *Rilke's Apotheosis*, p. 35. Romano Guardini attributes 'eine Art religiöser Unbedingtheit' to this line of thinking: *Rainer Maria Rilkes Deutung des Daseins* (Munich: Kosel, 1953), p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Fritz Dehn, *Rainer Maria Rilke und sein Werk: Eine Deutung* (Leipzig: Insel, [1934]), p. 240. Dehn's angle was taken up by the Jesuit writer Hubert Becher: 'bei seiner gewiß ernst zu



Energie sehr bald in den Dingen, sein auf das Jetzt und Hier gerichtetes Gefühl erlebt Gott in den Dingen'.<sup>24</sup>

By the end of the 1930s, Hans Egon Holthusen was able to identify a cause for this trend: 'Es ist kennzeichnend für die religiöse Unsicherheit und Verworrenheit unseres Zeitalters, daß man sich nicht enthalten konnte, den Lyriker Rilke für einen religiösen Genius zu erklären', stating categorically: 'Rilke hat sich von der Kraft und Herrlichkeit des Unsichtbaren erregt dem Glauben des Abendlandes immer gegenüber gewusst und zwar ausdrücklicherweise als ein Ungläubiger'.<sup>25</sup> In the same year, Eudo Mason began the foreword to an important book on Rilke with an even more vehement denial, confessing that although he had spent many years trying to read Rilke as a religious poet, he had come to understand that this was simply impossible: 'Die Überzeugung drängte sich [dem Verfasser] auf, daß der innerste Kern der Rilkeschen Lebenshaltung nicht das Religiöse, sondern das Kunstschöpferische sei – und zwar in einer solchen Ausprägung, daß es sich unmöglich noch als eine einfache Abart oder Abstufung des Religiösen auffassen läßt, sondern vielmehr im tief-wesentlichen Gegensatz zu diesem steht, ja geradezu als eine leidenschaftliche Umkehrung der eigentlichen Religion bezeichnet werden müßte'.<sup>26</sup> Mason read many of the apparently religious references in Rilke's work as bearing instead a poetological meaning.

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nehmenden Gottsuche [legte Rilke] solche Eigenschaften Gott bei, wie sie beim Fürsten der Finsternis zu erwarten wären': 'Die Religiosität und die "Mystik" Rainer Maria Rilkes', *Zeitschrift für Askese und Mystik*, 19 (1944), 95-107 (p. 105).

<sup>24</sup> Albert Schäfer, *Die Gottesanschauung Rainer Maria Rilkes: Versuch einer Entwicklungsgeschichte* (Würzburg: Konrad Tritsch, 1938), p. 82.

<sup>25</sup> Hans Egon Holthusen, 'Rilkes mythische Wendung', *Hochland*, 37 (1939-40), 304-16.

<sup>26</sup> Eudo C. Mason, *Lebenshaltung und Symbolik bei Rainer Maria Rilke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1939).

By 1950, in a two-part article on Rilke for the Swiss Catholic journal *Orientierung*, Bert Herzog was able to take as his starting point a milder statement of just this view: ‘es muß sogar als eines der wenigen sicheren Ergebnisse der Forschung gelten, daß Rilke von nichts weiter entfernt gewesen sein kann, als von einem konfessionellem Christentum’.<sup>27</sup> Herzog’s aim, however, was to row back somewhat from the aggressive anti-confessional readings of Mason and others, themselves provoked by previous sentimental (and often nationalistic) attempts to anchor a powerful poet in the religious world in which they themselves felt at home. He sought somewhat unconvincingly to revive the assumptions of readings by theologically expert critics such as the Catholic philosopher Romano Guardini (whose 1941 book Mason vehemently disliked) who see a particular value in literature that appears to demand interpretation in ways not limited to the strictly rational. Guardini wrote of the *Duineser Elegien*,

der Leser muß sich auf eine Mächtigkeit beziehen, die bei ihrer Entstehung gewaltet hat und die Bewegung ihrer Gedanken und Bilder lenkt, den “Geist”, that they are therefore capable of expressing ‘Tieferes, jedenfalls Anderes [...] als Dichtungen, die unmittelbar aus dem zu Tage liegenden persönlichen oder geschichtlichen Leben reden [...]. Solche Texte [öffnen] eine Türe zu Vorgängen in der Tiefe des aus der Geschichte heraufdrängenden noch Ungewordenen und Ungestalteten’.<sup>28</sup>

Herzog seeks to compensate for ‘der Mangel im Bewußtsein’ with ‘das Unbewußte’.

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<sup>27</sup> Bert Herzog, ‘Auseinandersetzungen um R. M. Rilke’, *Orientierung*, 7 (1950), 76-80, and 8 (1950), 88-91 (here pp. 7 and 76).

<sup>28</sup> Quotations here are from Guardini’s fullest study of the *Elegien*, his 1953 monograph *Rainer Maria Rilkes Deutung des Daseins*, p. 16.

From the 1950s on, the presence of God receded from Rilke studies, which were dominated by two trends. Philosophical and especially ‘existenzphilosophische Deutungen’ emerged, following Heidegger to some extent, with critics such as Friedrich Bollnow insisting that any apparently metaphysical elements in his writing were ‘auf ihren anthropologischen Gehalt zu reduzieren’.<sup>29</sup> The last flowering of the philosophical tradition of Rilke interpretations was Käte Hamburger’s phenomenological approach, developed between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s.<sup>30</sup> The post-war period also saw a series of psychologically inspired studies of Rilke’s ‘Persönlichkeit’ that attempted to make good what they saw as the failure of traditional literary scholarship.<sup>31</sup> The major study by the Swiss critic Heinrich Imhoff, *Rilkes «Gott»*, emerges to some extent from this line. Rephrasing the traditional question of what Rilke says *about* God as ‘was meint Rilke mit dem Worte “Gott”?’ , Imhoff sees Rilke as diverting what might have been a concern with the transcendental both inwardly and outwardly, into the human psyche and into the ‘things’ of the external world, which then take on a ‘pseudo-göttlichen Rang’.<sup>32</sup> Out of this combination of the human and the earthly, Rilke develops the figures of ‘der göttliche Sohn’, ‘der neue Messias’ or ‘der kommende Gott’. And this line of argument, over the next decades, feeds into psychobiographical investigations of the kind proposed by Anton Bucher, who concludes

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<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Bollnow, *Rilke*. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1951), p. 102.

<sup>30</sup> Käte Hamburger, *Rilke: Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1976); cf. also her essay ‘Die phänomenologische Struktur der Dichtung Rilkes’, in *Philosophie der Dichter: Novalis, Schiller, Rilke* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1966), pp. 179-275.

<sup>31</sup> See for example Erich Simenauer, *Rainer Maria Rilke: Legende und Mythos* (Bern: Paul Haupt, 1953).

<sup>32</sup> Heinrich Imhoff, *Rilkes ‘Gott’: R. M. Rilkes Gottesbild als Spiegelung des Unbewussten* (Heidelberg: Lothar Stiehm, 1983).

that Rilke's was a mature and sophisticated religious personality, settling at the fourth stage of Oser and Gmünder's five-part model of religious judgement. In this stage there is no clear belief in a transcendent separate Divine Being, and where images of God exist they do so only as symbols or universal principles,<sup>33</sup> although it is debatable whether this model takes sufficient account of the difference between poetic writing and other more straightforwardly self-revelatory discourse.

### III

Whatever the flaws of these approaches, they have the merit of taking seriously the centrality of Rilke's engagement with the images, concepts and traditions that coalesce in the word 'God'. Ever since he had been subjected to his mother's extreme Catholic piety during his childhood Rilke granted God and religion a prominent place in his mind and his life. Rilke's mother, Phia, was very pious and attracted to the pomp and circumstance of religion, to ritual and ceremony.<sup>34</sup> In a short memoir she wrote after her son's death in 1926 she demonstrates her own sentimentality at least as much as telling us anything about Rainer:

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<sup>33</sup> Anton Bucher, *Die religiöse Entwicklung des Dichters Rainer Maria Rilke: Ein Versuch, Rilkes religiösen Werdegang mit Hilfe des Stufenkonstruktes 'Religiöses Urteil' von F. Oser und P. Gmünder nachzuzeichnen* (Freibourg: Pädagogisches Institut, 1986); Bucher et al., *Psychobiographien religiöser Entwicklung: Glaubensprofile zwischen Individualität und Universalität* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> Wolfram K. Legner, 'The Religion of Rainer Maria Rilke before his Visits to Russia', *Monatshefte*, 30.8 (1938), 440-53 (p. 441).

An einem kleinen Kruzifix lehrte ich René, wie der liebe Gott am Kreuz, an seinen Händen und Füßen, Schmerzen hat, rührend lieb küßte er das Kreuz und sagte, Papa und Mama auch küssen. Er blieb dabei, jeden Abend.... Einmal hatten wir Gesellschaft, ich brachte René rascher zu Bett, übersah i[h]m das Kreuz zum Kuß zu geben, da kommt die Bonne und flüstert mir zu, René erwartet mich. Er sitzt im Bettchen und sagt: ich habe heute dem Himmelpapa keinen Kuß gegeben, da kann ich doch nicht schlafen.... So innig, war mein teures Kind mit Gott vertraut, und blieb es für sein ganzes Leben. Den lieben Gott nannte er 'Himmelpapa', die Mutter Gottes: 'Himmelsmama'.<sup>35</sup>

Whilst turning his back on his childhood faith, Rilke nonetheless valued the Bible throughout his life, as is well-attested. He wrote to the 'young poet', Franz Xaver Kappus, on 5 April 1903: 'Von allen meinen Büchern sind mir nur wenige unentbehrlich, und zwei sind sogar immer unter meinen Dingen, wo ich auch bin. Sie sind auch hier um mich: die Bibel, und die Bücher des großen dänischen Dichters *Jens Peter Jacobsen*' (BjD, p. 17) – and to his wife on 22 February 1906 of how, at the time of the *Neue Gedichte*, he worked 'Morgen, und Nachmittage mit der Bibel auf dem Leseput'.<sup>36</sup> In one of his two contributions to the volume of essays mentioned above, August Stahl goes much further than he did in the 1978 *Kommentar* to demonstrate comprehensively just how deep-seated Rilke's engagement with religious culture, writing, architecture, and art was.<sup>37</sup> Stahl includes in his study a reference to

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid..

<sup>36</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis 1906*, ed. by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Leipzig: Insel, 1930), p. 302 (= B02-06).

<sup>37</sup> August Stahl, 'Rilkes ausdauernde Arbeit am Mythos', in *'Gott' in der Dichtung Rainer Maria Rilkes*, ed. by Fischer, pp. 37-68.

the 'Briefe über Cézanne' of 1907 in which Rilke feels the need to remind us emphatically of how the artist heard mass and vespers on Sunday, and of how listening to Bach's St Matthew Passion, with its combination of 'unermüdlich gekonntes Handwerk und einen ununterbrochen geübten Glauben' makes Rilke more conscious of how his own lack of Christian belief prevents him 'selbst diejenige Hingerissenheit zu fassen, die die Aufnahme des Ganzen zum Ereignis machen müßte.'<sup>38</sup>

Rilke's two visits to Russia with Lou Andreas-Salomé in 1899 and 1900 were of central and lasting importance. Rilke saw Russian culture as possessing greater 'ursprüngliche Integrität' than his own, Western culture, which was 'von der Zivilisation und dem technischen Fortschritt infiziert', to quote Gennady Vassiliev's neat summary,<sup>39</sup> making Russia, and especially but not exclusively its peasant culture, far superior to the West.<sup>40</sup> Idealistic, indeed almost atavistic views such as these are frequently expressed in religious terms. In the essay 'Russische Kunst', for example, mostly written in January 1900 but completed in July 1901 shortly after his return, Rilke contrasts the West since the Renaissance with 'das Reich Ruriks' in which 'noch der erste Tag dauert, der Tag Gottes, der

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<sup>38</sup> Rilke, *Briefe an Nanny Wunderly-Volkart*, ed. by Niklaus Bigler und Rätus Luck, 2 vols (Frankfurt/M: Insel, 1977), p. 194 (letter of 22 March 1922; = BW NWV).

<sup>39</sup> See Gennady Vassiliev, 'Rainer Maria Rilke und Russland: Erfahrung der Kulturübersetzung', <https://hse.ru/pubs/share/direct/document/54907493>, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> See Ilja Roshanskij, 'Rainer Maria Rilke. Die Hauptabschnitte seiner schöpferischen Evolution', in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Worpswede. Auguste Rodin. Briefe. Gedichte* (Moscow: Verlag Kunst, 1971), pp. 7-49 (p. 24).

Schöpfungstag' (KA, IV, 153).<sup>41</sup> The very day after their arrival in 1899, Rilke, Lou and Andreas visited Tolstoy, who spoke dismissively of the faith of the Russian peasants, but this did not insulate them from its powerful attractions. Andreas-Salomé reflected in a diary note later published, 'obgleich uns Tolstoi auf das heftigste ermahnt hatte, abergläubischem Volkstreiben nicht noch durch dessen Mitfeier zu huldigen, fand die Osternacht uns doch, direkt von ihm kommend, unter der Gewalt der Kremlglocken'.<sup>42</sup> Rilke wrote to his mother in even more directly religious terms of this experience, obviously overwhelmed by the sensory experience of the golden cupolas of the Kremlin, the brilliant white of its walls, and the music in the churches: 'Die Klänge des Orients, gespielt auf den Orgeln dehmütiger Gedanken: das ist Moskau, das ist Rußland, denn Moskau ist Rußland',<sup>43</sup> and his enthusiasm for the Orthodox forms of worship was such that he bought a 17th-century silver pectoral cross to wear. Five years later he wrote to Lou recalling the occasion:

Mir war ein einziges Mal Ostern; das war damals in jener langen, ungewöhnlichen, ungemeinen, erregten Nacht, da alles Volk sich drängte, und als der Iwan Welikij, der große Glockenturm im Kreml, mich schlug in der Dunkelheit, Schlag für Schlag. Das war mein Ostern, und ich glaube, es reicht für ein ganzes Leben aus; die Botschaft ist mir in jener Moskauer Nacht seltsam groß gegeben worden, ist mir ins Blut gegeben

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<sup>41</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke: Kommentierte Ausgabe*, ed. by Manfred Engel, Ulrich Fülleborn, Horst Nalewski and August Stahl, 4+1 vols (Frankfurt/M and Leipzig: Insel, 1996-2003), IV, 153 (= KA).

<sup>42</sup> Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Rainer Maria Rilke* (Hamburg: Severus, 2017), p. 20.

<sup>43</sup> Rilke, *Briefe an die Mutter*, ed. Ruth Sieber-Rilke, 2 vols, Frankfurt a. M and Leipzig 2009, I, 102 (letter of 29 April 1899, underlined in the original).

worden und ins Herz, ich weiß es jetzt: [...] Christus ist auferstanden! – [...] Er ist wahrhaftig auferstanden!<sup>44</sup>

This enthusiasm was to last, and only a few years before his death he recalled how Russia had revealed ‘die Brüderlichkeit und das Dunkel Gottes, in dem allein Gemeinschaft ist’.<sup>45</sup>

Interestingly he recalled later that *naming* God was normal for him in that early period, ‘So nannte ich ihn damals auch, den über mich hereingebrochenen Gott, und lebte lange im Vorraum seines Namens, auf den Knien’, although this was to change with time.

By the time he wrote *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* between 1904 and 1910 his earlier ease in naming God had been problematized. Rilke sometimes writes as if God is a task or a project – ‘[diejenigen], die gleich mit Gott anfangen wollen’, ‘wir aber, die wir uns Gott vorgenommen haben’, ‘noch eh wir Gott angefangen haben’ – and indeed the vocabulary of *work* is very prominent in this context (KA III, 584 and 620). What Malte recognizes as important to avoid is any sense that God is merely ‘out there’ to be found, simply to be imported ready-made into our consciousness. The opening of an alternative conclusion to the *Aufzeichnungen*, begins, ‘Wenn Gott ist, so ist alles getan und wir sind triste, überzählige Überlebende’ (KA III, 652). According to Malte, Tolstoy (the subject of this additional *Aufzeichnung*), ‘jener große Todesfürchtige [...] begann [...] in [seiner verwandelnden Arbeit], unter seliger Mühsal, seinen einzig möglichen Gott’ causing those who read his books to begin working on their own God. The alternative to embarking on your own God is getting one off the peg, as it were, and in his isolation and loneliness Tolstoy is

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<sup>44</sup> Rilke, Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Ernst Pfeiffer, Zurich & Wiesbaden 1952, pp. 139-40 (letter of 30 March 1904).

<sup>45</sup> Rilke, *Briefe in zwei Bänden*, ed. by Horst Nalewski (Frankfurt/ M and Leipzig: Insel, 1991), II, 291 (= B-HN; letter of 22 February 1923 to Ilse Jahr).



afraid, alone with the tempter, ‘so allein, daß er sich bangsam zu dem fertigen Gott entschloß, der gleich zu haben war, zu dem verabredeten Gott derer, die keinen machen können und doch einen brauchen’ (KA III, 654). There is a clear link between this ending and the opening of the *Aufzeichnungen*, in which hundreds in Paris die modern, off-the-peg deaths rather than the bespoke ones of the past, they die ‘fabrikmäßig’ (KA III, 458) instead of tailoring their deaths individually like Chamberlain Brigge.

The Tolstoy *Aufzeichnung* – one not included when the work was published in 1910 but given in the *Kritische Ausgabe* as an alternative ending – picks up the sense of making that is important both to Malte and to Rilke’s conception of ‘der Bezug zu Gott’ and indeed any ‘Bezug zur Welt’. Much earlier, in *Aufzeichnung* 14, Malte’s first response to a shift in his perception of the world is to work on something: ‘Ich glaube, ich müßte anfangen, etwas zu arbeiten, jetzt, da ich sehen lerne’ (KA III, 466). When Malte unrolls his mother’s lace collection with her, an apparently naïve link is made between work and salvation: “Denk nun erst, wenn wir sie machen müßten”, sagte Maman und sah förmlich erschrocken aus. Das konnte ich mir gar nicht vorstellen. [...] “Die sind gewiß in den Himmel gekommen, die das gemacht haben”, meinte ich bewundernd. Ich erinnere, es fiel mir auf, daß ich lange nicht nach dem Himmel gefragt hatte’ (KA III, 551).<sup>46</sup> Sentimental though this certainly is on one level, the idea that there is merit in work is an important thread in *Malte*. It has little if anything to do with the theological debate about the relative importance of faith and works

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<sup>46</sup> The poem ‘Die Spitze I’ from the first part of the *Neue Gedichte* (early 1906) explores in more detail how the manufacture of the lace links work and salvation as the lace maker sacrifices her sight in the creation of the work of art: ‘ist das unmenschlich, daß zu dieser Spitze, / zu diesem kleinen dichten Spitzenstück / zwei Augen wurden? - Willst du sie zurück? // Du Langvergangene und schließlich Blinde, / ist deine Seligkeit in diesem Ding’ (KA I, 474-75).

for salvation, but concerns instead the shaping of the self that is achieved via concentration and application. In the last of the *Aufzeichnungen* published by Rilke, Malte sees the Prodigal Son: ‘Ich seh mehr als ihn, ich sehe sein Dasein, das damals die lange Liebe zu Gott begann, die stille, ziellose Arbeit’ (KA III, 633). It is a condition of the modern world, and Malte distinguishes this from the more immediate ‘access’ of ‘die Heiligen [...], die gleich mit Gott anfangen wollten um jeden Preis. Wir muten uns dies nicht mehr zu. Wir ahnen, daß er zu schwer ist für uns, daß wir ihn hinausschieben müssen, um langsam die lange Arbeit zu tun, die uns von ihm trennt’ (KA III, 584). It applies to poetry, too, and the work of the translator of Sappho in *Aufzeichnung* 68 is described in a way that brings out a nuance in this concept:

[Er] erwärmt sich wieder für seine Arbeit. [...] Er bleibt nicht immer über die Blätter gebeugt, er lehnt sich oft zurück, er schließt die Augen über einer wiedergelesenen Zeile, und ihr Sinn verteilt sich in seinem Blut. Nie war er der Antike so gewiß. [...] Nun begreift er momentan die dynamische Bedeutung jener frühen Welteinheit, die etwas wie ein neues, gleichzeitiges Aufnehmen aller menschlichen Arbeit war. (KA III, 621-22)

The translator makes it clear that what is crucial in order to achieve insight like this is not mechanical, not hard work in and of itself (although this may be a part of the process, even a precondition for success), but the creation of a condition in the self, by focus and application – a condition in which larger truths can be intuited. So when the Prodigal Son ‘vergaß Gott beinah über der harten Arbeit, sich ihm zu nähern’ (KA III, 634), he is paradoxically closer to God than when he thinks of Him directly.

In Malte’s reworking of the parable of the Prodigal Son, the latter’s ‘stille, ziellose Arbeit’ is more closely defined. ‘Während er sich sehnte, endlich so meisterhaft geliebt zu

sein, begriff sein an Fernen gewohntes Gefühl Gottes äußersten Abstand' (KA III, 633): part of the process of achieving the love of God is paradoxically to accept how far one is from possessing it. Note that Rilke never says 'deserving it', which some Christians might. Instead of 'worth' Rilke thinks in terms of process and patience. He compares the enthusiasm of beginning the process of discovering God with that of learning a new language: 'Er war wie einer, der eine herrliche Sprache hört und fiebernd sich vornimmt, in ihr zu dichten. Noch stand ihm die Bestürzung bevor, zu erfahren, wie schwer diese Sprache sei' (KA III, 633). One can't run before one has learned to walk. But the difficulties are there to reveal the qualitative differences between mere love and real love: 'Nun, da er so mühsam und kummervoll lieben lernte, wurde ihm *gezeigt*, wie nachlässig und gering bisher alle Liebe gewesen war, die er zu leisten vermeinte. Wie aus keiner etwas hatte werden können, weil er nicht begonnen hatte, an ihr Arbeit zu tun und sie zu verwirklichen' (KA III, 633-34).

This may seem far removed from the world of 'die hiesigen Dinge', the realm of the *Neue Gedichte* – whose genesis was after all partly contemporaneous with that of *Malte* – but an underlying continuity is worth pointing out. Their aesthetic shares the craft and the focused work of formal shaping with a mental space described in Rilke's famous letter to his wife of 8 March 1907 as the creative inattention of 'Anschauen'.<sup>47</sup> Things achieve their inner significance when one ceases to probe them directly for it. A further parallel emerges within the *Aufzeichnungen* as Malte considers the blind newspaper seller who is revealed almost epiphanically to him. This man first reminds Malte of 'Christusse' and Pietas – artistic renditions of religious figures or attitudes, therefore (KA III, 600). These almost scare Malte off, and at first he is too 'cowardly' to look at the man. So he 'works' at creating his sense of him: 'Ich war beschäftigt, ihn mir vorzustellen, ich unternahm die Arbeit, ihn einzubilden, und der Schweiß trat mir aus vor Anstrengung', assisted to some extent by the mental echoes

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<sup>47</sup> B02-06, p. 214 ('Das Anschauen ist eine so wunderbare Sache [...]').

of religious sculptural tropes. Eventually Malte reaches a point where ‘das Bild dieses Mannes sich schließlich oft auch ohne Anlaß stark und schmerzhaft in mir zusammenzog zu so hartem Elend’ (KA III, 601), but this is not enough; ultimately he resolves to go and look properly at the object of his imaginative efforts.

What happens next is telling: Rilke’s account of what is essentially a series of aesthetic processes towards a cognitive end is interrupted by the evocation of the onset of spring. ‘Nun muß man wissen’, says Malte, ‘es ging auf den Frühling zu. Der Tagwind hatte sich gelegt, die Gassen waren lang und befriedigt’ – and so on (KA III, 601). ‘Nun *muß* man wissen’ is an odd phrase. The abrupt shift from Malte’s slightly tortured attempts to recreate in his imagination the figure of the newspaper vendor to a consideration of the atmospheric conditions on a Sunday in Paris feels at first like a non-sequitur. But this manoeuvre on the part of the narrative voice is in fact just as essential as Malte claims. Being told then ‘[d]ie Turmaufsätze von Saint-Sulpice zeigten sich heiter und unerwartet hoch in der Windstille’ enacts the cognitive distraction that permits the epiphanic revelation of the old man. Only then can Malte realize instantly ‘daß meine *Vorstellung* wertlos war’ (KA III, 601) and ‘see’: ‘Ich war stehengeblieben, und während ich das alles fast gleichzeitig sah, fühlte ich, daß er einen anderen Hut hatte und eine ohne Zweifel sonntägliche Halsbinde’ (KA III, 602). At the same time as he sees, therefore, his intuition is unleashed, and feeling can accompany the seeing and achieve a task that ‘Arbeit’ and ‘Vorstellung’ could not. Malte had already learned – via these processes of ‘Arbeit’ and ‘Vorstellung’ – how ‘es war außerdem so vieles, was zu ihm gehörte; denn dies begriff ich schon damals, daß nichts an ihm nebensächlich sei’ (KA III, 600). ‘Windstille’ – a term to which I will return below – is the condition under which the relation of the incidental details to the sense of a whole becomes achievable.

The result is an avalanche of realization. ‘Mein Gott, fiel es mir mit Ungestüm ein, so *bist* du also. Es gibt Beweise für deine Existenz. Ich habe sie alle vergessen und habe keinen

je verlangt, denn welche ungeheure Verpflichtung läge in deiner Gewißheit. Und doch, nun wird mir's gezeigt. Dieses ist dein Geschmack, hier hast du Wohlgefallen' (KA III, 602).

Each element here merits closer consideration. 'Mein Gott' looks as if it is a casual interjection, or perhaps a mildly blasphemous misuse of the name of the Lord, but it is surely here an address to God and an affirmation of the sudden conviction that He does after all exist. 'Mit Ungestüm' suggests something of the force of a conversion experience, overriding the impotence of rational proof. And Rilke specifically opposes 'Gewißheit' to the process of 'zeigen': 'nun wird mir's gezeigt'. And at this point Rilke, or Malte, shifts into an idiom strongly reminiscent of the Bible: two of the gospels record 'Ja, Vater, so hat es dir wohlgefallen', for example (Matthew 11. 26 and Luke 10. 21). The biblical discourse seeks to normalize what is potentially a very surprising causal twist, from an encounter with a newspaper vendor to a demonstration of the existence of God, and this is Rilke's point: it is the capacity to recognize and understand the *human* that is the precondition for any meaningful grasp of what 'God' might mean.

There are many other aspects of Rilke's sense of what God is or should be that emerge from *Malte*, but one might be singled out that is connected with Malte's cousin and lover Abelone, and therefore with the complex and central issue of 'intransitive' or 'directionless' love. Of Abelone Malte wonders in *Aufzeichnung* 70:

Manchmal früher fragte ich mich, warum Abelone die Kalorien ihres großartigen Gefühls nicht an Gott wandte. Ich weiß, sie sehnte sich, ihrer Liebe alles Transitive zu nehmen, aber konnte ihr wahrhaftiges Herz sich darüber täuschen, daß Gott nur eine Richtung der Liebe ist, kein Liebesgegenstand? Wußte sie nicht, daß keine Gegenliebe von ihm zu fürchten war? [...] Oder wollte sie Christus vermeiden? (KA III, 628)

The traditional relationship with the Christian God – namely that He expects us to love Him and loves us in return – is not one that one might intuitively expect to present difficulties, but Malte and Rilke see God differently from this. The love of and for God is ideally about the loving self, not about the object of love; if God is ‘nur eine Richtung der Liebe’ rather than the object of love, then that love is akin to the love of the long list of women – Gaspara Stampa, Mariana Alcoforado, Louise Labé, and all the others evoked in *Aufzeichnung* 66, where the diction is also markedly biblical – whose love is unrequited and thereby enhanced and purified.

The key issue here is the authenticity of the self; the major risk is that religion, and Christianity in particular, robs the self of its autonomy and makes it dependent on someone else’s – the Church’s – perception of a transcendent ideal with which it has little real need to engage. Rilke would not be Rilke if he did not express this also in ways that show how the enterprise of art is fully cognate with it. He juxtaposes the Divinity with the institution of the Theatre: ‘wir haben kein Theater, so wenig wir einen Gott haben: dazu gehört Gemeinsamkeit’ (KA III, 617). What the theatre and God have in common is the need for some form of community, for authentic mutual openness, but we keep too much of ourselves to ourselves, only allowing glimpses of what we actually are ‘[wenn es] nützt und paßt’ (KA III, 617).

We approach the nub of Rilke’s understanding of God at this time when he expands his comparison between God and the theatre audience: ‘Aber innen und vor Dir, mein Gott, innen vor Dir, Zuschauer: sind wir nicht ohne Handlung? Wir entdecken wohl, daß wir die Rolle nicht wissen, wir suchen einen Spiegel, wir möchten abschminken und das Falsche abnehmen und wirklich sein. Aber irgendwo haftet uns noch ein Stück Verkleidung an, das wir vergessen’ (KA III, 615). Malte’s childhood episode, in which he dresses up and is

confronted by his image in a mirror that threatens to take hold, recorded a risk he took with his authenticity by becoming so completely ‘other’ without the ability to control the transfer. In our dealings with both God and other people – the concept of ‘Zuschauer’ here shifts between the theatrical and the social – we fail because we are neither pure actor (like Eleonore Duse) nor properly ourselves, ‘weder Seiende, noch Schauspieler’ (KA III, 615). And the reasons are linked with how we have not allowed ourselves to become truly authentic before having a try at seeing how we interact with God – we are not ready; we can only handle God when we know who we are. ‘Wir aber, die wir uns Gott vorgenommen haben, wir können nicht fertig werden. [...] Noch eh wir Gott angefangen haben, beten wir schon zu ihm: laß uns die Nacht überstehen. Und dann das Kranksein. Und dann die Liebe’ (KA III, 620) – which are all things that we ought not to be exporting or offloading to a distant supernatural power.

‘Der Brief des jungen Arbeiters’, unpublished in Rilke’s lifetime, was written more than a decade after *Malte*, between 12 and 15 February 1922, and at a time, therefore, when one might think that Rilke’s attentions were more than adequately consumed by the completion of the *Duineser Elegien* and the composition of the *Sonette an Orpheus* (and in fact ‘der Brief ist auf denselben Schreibblock, der am Anfang die Entwürfe der *Zehnten* und am Schluß die der *Fünften Elegie* enthält, nur mit Bleistift geschrieben’, KA IV, 1060). It purports to be a letter from a young factory worker addressed to a ‘Herr V.’ – who is the Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren, whom Rilke admired deeply and who had been killed in 1916 as he was trying to board a moving train. The reasons why a letter on Christianity should be addressed to Verhaeren emerge most clearly from a comment made by Rilke to Adelheid von der Marwitz on 14 January 1919 on Verhaeren’s capacity to direct ‘die ganze Kraft und Werbung, die Menschen zu Gott werfen, auf die *Menschen* zu richten [...], zu denen er Zutrauen, Erwartung, strahlende Freude –, ja eben den Glauben eines großen gewaltigen

Gläubigen zu fassen und anzuwenden wußte' (B-HN I, 700-01). Like Rilke, Verhaeren was more focused on the actual activity and attitudes of human beings than on what a putative deity might expect, and the young worker evidently trusts the Belgian poet to appreciate the nature of his anxieties about faith.

Given the prominence of 'work' in Malte's conception of what religion might be, it is not surprising that this is the central quality that 'der junge Arbeiter' embodies. His fundamental question is one that he seems almost embarrassed to ask, and which even appears without a question mark: 'Wer ja, – anders kann ich es jetzt nicht ausdrücken, *wer* ist denn dieser Christus, der sich in alles hineinmischt' (KA IV, 735). It is almost impertinent for someone who knows nothing about us, our work, our highs and lows 'immer wieder [zu verlangen], in unserem Leben, der *erste* zu sein'. He is sceptical that the historical Christ could have understood much about the modern world – and uses a fine image of Christ being unable 'durch einen fertig gekauften Rock [zu *scheinen*]', an image of manufactured inauthenticity that recalls dying 'fabrikmäßig' in *Malte*.

The image of the cross is a source of irritation to the Worker, who feels it is out of place in our time. The cross, he says, ought to be 'nur ein Kreuzweg': 'Es soll uns gewiß nicht überall aufgeprägt werden, wie ein Brandmal', but somehow 'mit uns so eins geworden sein oder wir mit ihm, *an* ihm, daß wir nicht immerfort uns mit ihm beschäftigen müßten, sondern einfach ruhig mit Gott' (KA IV, 736). Whatever religion is, it should not be something mankind feels as external to humanity itself. In the same vein, the Worker gives some explanation of his mounting frustration with Christ, noting that he prefers the Old Testament to the New because it is in the nature of those books to *point towards* God, whereas the New Testament ought really in some sense to hand him over to us, not defer him yet further. Christians talk endlessly of the *process* of redemption, but the Worker wonders when it will be time to usher in a completed state of 'Erlöstsein'. The Koran, in contrast –



which the Worker has tried but confesses he found difficult – seems to conclude by getting to God, by achieving something. Christ must have wanted to ‘point’ too, he says – ‘Christus hat sicher dasselbe gewollt. Zeigen’ (KA IV, 737) – but humanity does not seem to understand that, and rather than following the direction of the pointing bites at the hand like a dog.

The cross was to be a ‘Wegweiser’ rather than a monument, therefore, but in the Worker’s view Christianity hasn’t followed this pointer, and has instead, as it were, camped at its foot and stayed put. Rilke piles up images of the dangers of remaining static in what he describes (with pseudo-proletarian disdain) as a ‘métier, eine bürgerliche Beschäftigung, sur place’ (KA IV, 737), waiting for something transcendental whilst wallowing in a basin that becomes soiled and has continually to be refilled. This constitutes a major transgression in the eyes of the Worker, ‘die Entwertung des Hiesigen’, which has been taking place for centuries. It also constitutes a fundamental misconception of the nature of humanity:

‘Welcher Wahnsinn,’ he writes, ‘uns nach einem Jenseits abzulenken, wo wir hier von Aufgaben und Erwartungen und Zukünften umstellt sind’; and worse, it is a swindle:

‘Welcher Betrug, Bilder hiesigen Entzückens zu entwenden, um sie hinter unserem Rücken an den Himmel zu verkaufen!’ (KA IV, 737-38). Rilke returns to the subject in a letter the following year, talking of ‘alles tief und innig Hiesige, das die Kirche ans Jenseits veruntreut hat.’<sup>48</sup> If the family silver (so to speak) is being sold off to the profit of something we do not know and cannot see, if we deport all the stuff of the world into a supposed ‘Jenseits’, the empty spaces will be filled with ‘Betrug’. Our cities are full of noise and painful light because we have exported the true light and joy to a Jerusalem somewhere out of this world. This the Worker finds fundamentally unsatisfactory, and instead he summarizes what the true ‘Gebrauchsanweisung Gottes’ should be, citing Francis of Assisi as his model: ‘Das Hiesige

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<sup>48</sup> B-HN, II, 292 (letter of 22 February 1923 to Ilse Jahr).

recht in die Hand nehmen, herzlich liebevoll, erstaunend, als unser, vorläufig, Einziges' (KA IV, 738).

This is a central theme in Rilke's relationship to God. In the person of the Worker, he regards what he thinks of as Christ's denigration of the earthly as a slight to God whose creation needs to be seen as perfectly satisfying. Again with St Francis in mind, he writes of the 'augenfällige Freundschaft und Heiterkeit der Erde' that is perceived and appreciated by only a few of those who are occupied with religion, which is the fault of the Church in his view (KA IV, 738). He cites St Francis's 'Hymn to the Sun', 'die ihm im Sterben herrlicher war als das Kreuz, das ja nur dazu da stand, in die Sonne zu *weisen*' (KA IV, 738) – picking up the theme of pointing forward rather than remaining an end in itself. The 'Church' (meaning the body rather than the buildings, about which Rilke is almost always positive) had failed to reconcile the contradiction between the Christian discourse of renunciation and the glories of the earth that was to be renounced. 'Das, was man die Kirche nennt, war zu einem solchen Gewirr von Stimmen angeschwollen, daß der Gesang des Sterbenden, überall übertönt, nur von ein paar einfachen Mönchen aufgefangen war und unendlich bejaht von der Landschaft seines anmutigen Tals' (KA IV, 738). The Worker provocatively suggests that the Church might be congratulated for not collapsing under the weight of abuse by certain murderous popes, their bastard children and their courtesans, because in them there is paradoxically more Christianity than in the dry evangelists – 'lebendiges, unaufhaltsames, verwandeltes [Christentum]', more 'Lebensgewicht' (KA IV, 739).

In a nicely judged rhetorical gesture, the Worker shifts from his wry critique of what is wrong with religion to a passage of poignant affirmation of a more appropriate spiritual stance based on his recollection of a period spent in Avignon with a friend, Pierre. The friend was a painter with a lung condition, who told him intensely about his inner life as they looked round the papal monuments. The Worker looks back on that period almost as if it were not

time but ‘ein Zustand des Freiseins, recht fühlbar ein *Raum*, ein Umgebensein von Offenem, kein Vergehn’ (KA IV, 740) – thereby offering a productive alternative to images of embracing and holding. ‘Ich schaute,’ he writes, ‘ich lernte, ich begriff –, und aus diesen Tagen stammt auch die Erfahrung, daß mir “Gott” zu sagen, so leicht, so wahrhaftig, so [...] problemlos einfach sei’ (KA IV, 740). Again we encounter Rilke’s recurrent concern with what it means to *say* ‘God’, what the act of saying implies for both belief and the existence of God, and there are elements congregating here, hinted at rather than explicitly evoked, both of Rilke’s poetics in the *Neue Gedichte* and of the injunction ‘sag ihm die Dinge’ in the *Elegien* more than a decade and a half later (KA II, 228, l. 57). There is something paradoxical in this passage. On the one hand there is the attempt to make “‘Gott” zu sagen’ meaningful, more than a token, a habit, an empty vessel or a ‘Schein-Ding’ characteristic of the modern world in the way that Rilke famously explained to Hulewicz on 13 November 1925 (B-HN II, 377). On the other hand, however, there is something Pascalian about the method, which is precisely to *use* habit, to allow meaning to creep up on one when one’s attention is elsewhere in a way not unlike the process of ‘Anschauen’ already alluded to, adumbrated in another well-known letter, this time to Clara Rilke in March 1907.<sup>49</sup> In his *Pensées*, at the end of the famous ‘wager’ (Lafuma no. 418, headed ‘Infini rien’), Pascal cites the case of unbelievers who wish to be ‘cured’ of their unbelief by behaving just as if they did believe:

Vous voulez aller à la foi et vous n’en savez pas le chemin. Vous voulez vous guérir de l’infidélité et vous en demandez les remèdes, apprenez de ceux qui ont été liés comme vous et qui parient maintenant tout leur bien. Ce sont gens qui savent ce chemin que vous voudriez suivre et guéris d’un mal dont vous voulez guérir; suivez la

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<sup>49</sup> See above, note 47.

manière par où ils ont commencé. C'est en faisant tout comme s'ils croyaient, en prenant de l'eau bénite, en faisant dire des messes, etc.<sup>50</sup>

The contexts are quite incompatible, but the idea of going through the motions to allow something meaningful to take root whilst unobserved by the conscious mind is present in each case. Pascal would attribute the hidden workings of the mind to God; Rilke would place humanity more centrally.

One of the entrances to the cathedral church in Avignon is said to have been a remnant of a former temple of Heracles, and Rilke's *Worker* is more impressed by this as evidence of a form of Christianity because it is powerful, a seed likely to give rise to a strong church. He nicely contrasts it with the taste and power of the modern church, which is likened to a tisane, a feeble herbal tea made only of the most delicate leaves. The robust impression given by this Christian building derives somehow from the presence beneath the modern edifice of a shattered statue of an ancient Greek god – a reference to the habit of building Christian churches on the sites of heathen temples – whose 'Erblihung' and 'Dasein' are so full and potent that they can overcome the 'Angst' that characterises the modern age (KA IV, 741).

The *Worker's* girlfriend '[empfindet] Gott so wie eine Art Patron' and is therefore anxious about going into churches; he has nonetheless shown her something that yet again might be regarded intuitively as the opposite of what could be expected, namely 'daß Gott einen in den Kirchen in Ruhe läßt, daß er nichts verlangt' (KA IV, 741). One cannot quite say that God is not there, it seems, but what *is* there is something that people have contributed to the place over the centuries, that has been absorbed by the stone under the 'Angriffe von der Orgel, diese Überfälle, diese Stürme des Lieds, jeden Sonntag, diese Orkane der großen

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<sup>50</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Louis Lafuma (Paris: Du Seuil, 1963), p. 551.

Feiertage’ – phrases that recall the intensity of Rilke’s earlier impressions of Orthodox Easter celebrations in Moscow. The Worker calls this condition ‘Windstille’ using the same word as Malte does in the peculiar transition in the newspaper seller episode in *Malte* that triggered something akin to a divine revelation (KA IV, 741 and III, 601). Old churches are not intimidated by such ‘Angriffe’, unlike newer ones which are less resistant, being full only of ‘gute Beispiele’. Old churches encompass ‘das Arge und Böse und das Fürchterliche, das Verkrüppelte, das was in Not, das was häßlich ist und das Unrecht –, und man möchte sagen, daß es irgendwie geliebt sei um Gottes willen’ (KA IV, 742). This section of the *Brief eines jungen Arbeiters* (from the Avignon reminiscences on) has many other links with *Malte Laurids Brigge* and the capacity of the old churches to contain what is usually rejected or feared is a religious version of the aesthetic that Malte discerns in Baudelaire’s ‘Une Charogne’, with the effect that the idea of ‘being loved for God’s sake’ becomes less a religious condition than an artistic one. The next phrase in the letter – ‘Hier ist der Engel, den es nicht giebt, und der Teufel, den es nicht giebt’ – matches one from the famous (and exactly contemporaneous) unicorn poem in the *Sonette an Orpheus* (II.iv): ‘O dieses ist das Tier, das es nicht giebt’ (KA II, 258). What the angel, the devil (and thus by implication God) *and* the unicorn have in common is that they do not need to exist to affect us, to stimulate us, to make us respond, to inspire us, to offer us coordinates in which to frame and understand ourselves, and it is better thus than if they did exist. Those who see God as real, even if hidden or distant (such as Pascal, whose God is a ‘deus absconditus’), are tempted to allow this belief to constrain and circumscribe themselves. Those who are not hampered by such a belief can nonetheless make use of what is real – the people, their prayers, their devotions, the music sung and played in the buildings in response to such a belief – and allow their own beings to unfold. As Rilke’s Worker says: ‘ich kann mir nicht helfen, ihre Unwirklichkeit macht [den Menschen] mir wirklicher. Ich kann das, was ich fühle, wenn es heißt: ein Mensch, dort drin

besser zusammennehmen, als auf der Straße unter den Leuten, die rein nichts Erkennbares an sich haben' (KA IV, 742).

The last stages of the letter constitute a powerful attack on Christianity for its denigration of human, physical and sexual love, for making 'wrong' the place 'wo die ganze Kreatur ihr seligstes Recht genießt'. 'Why is this necessary?', he asks.

Was setzt man uns nicht ein in unser Heimlichstes? Was müssen wirs umschleichen und geraten schließlich hinein, wie Einbrecher und Diebe, in unser eigenes schönes Geschlecht, in dem wir irren und uns stoßen und straucheln, um schließlich wie Ertappte wieder hinauszustürzen in das Zwielficht der Christlichkeit. [...] Warum hat man uns das Geschlecht heimatlos gemacht, statt das Fest unserer Zuständigkeit dorthin zu verlegen?

Gut, ich will zugeben, es soll nicht uns gehören, die wir nicht imstande sind, so unerschöpfliche Seligkeit zu verantworten und zu verwalten. Aber warum gehören wir nicht zu Gott von *dieser* Stelle aus? (KA IV, 744-45)

If sin and guilt had to be invented, then why not locate them elsewhere? What is wrong with belonging to God in this area of our lives, too? The use of the word 'gehören', looks as if it steps out of the pattern Rilke has created of images of independence and self-determination, but in fact it does not: humanity's sexual life is the high-point of our self-expression, the means by which we both manifest ourselves and reproduce ourselves, although for Rilke the former is much more important, especially as the institution of marriage as sponsored by the Church has appropriated procreation as one of its justifications. 'Mein Geschlecht ist [...] das Geheimnis meines eigenen Lebens' (KA IV, 745), the Worker writes, and to push it from its place in the centre destabilizes us existentially and lies at the root of the destabilization of

civilization, the ‘eigentümlich schiefe Verschuldung’ dividing us from the rest of nature. The letter ends with a mixture of defiance and confession: ‘Ich will, sehen Sie, anwendbar sein an Gott’ is the Worker’s conclusion (KA IV, 746). He is happy to continue doing what he does, *working* in the factory, ‘auf ihn zu’, without his *own* radiant light being broken up, even by Christ. Christ can’t grasp the machine he works at, he says, but he thinks God might and that he, the Worker, might dedicate his machine to Him as shepherds once did their lambs. He needs no-one to help him communicate with God. He thanks Verhaeren for his poems and for being ‘ein Lehrer, [der] uns das Hiesige rühmt’ (KA IV, 747).

The exposition of *Der Brief des jungen Arbeiters* has been so detailed partly because it is not as often studied as it might be and partly because of the circumstances of its composition, in the midst of work on the *Elegien* and the *Sonette* – which some scholars still suggest ‘have overcome almost all reliance on Christian imagery and narratives’.<sup>51</sup> This is clearly not the case. The celebrated Angel of the *Elegien* may be distinct from its Judaeo-Christian counterparts but it cannot be understood at all in complete isolation from them: where else could one look for the origins of the phrase ‘der Engel Ordnungen’? Islam does not have an angelology comparable to that developed by Christian theologians such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas, or by Maimonides and in the *Zohar*. In the opening lines of the first *Elegie* there is also an unmistakable resonance of Psalm 130, ‘De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine; Domine, exaudi vocem meam’. Furthermore, if Orpheus is obviously a classical figure, he shares with Christ the otherwise unique distinction of having visited the underworld and survived, a parallel that the cycle exploits on occasion. But *Der Brief* is important chiefly because, with a characteristically Rilkean obliqueness, using the mask of the Worker to utter questions and thoughts that at some level must be Rilke’s own, it displays a passion and an intensity about God and Christianity that confirm the impression that these

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<sup>51</sup> Wich-Schwarz, *Transformation of Language*, p. 98.

are not matters that can be regarded as playing a merely metaphorical role in Rilke's life and work, or as functioning as a kind of 'tradition quarry' of symbols, images and discourse that are deployed detached from the issues of belief and faith in which they were originally embedded.

Provisionally, therefore, the nature of Rilke's engagement with God might be summarized in a phrase from his letter to Ilse Jahr already cited: 'Statt des Besitzes erlernt man den Bezug'.<sup>52</sup> The phrase is a pithy one, and perhaps unremarkable as a statement of Rilke's theology, but it emerges from a context little short of extraordinary, because the addressee is a young fan, otherwise unknown to him, who had kindly sent him a paper-cut silhouette that he admired. Of his latter habit of no longer *naming* God Rilke notes:

es ist eine unbeschreibliche Diskretion zwischen uns, und wo einmal Nähe war und Durchdringung, da spannen sich neue Fernen, so wie im Atom, das die neue Wissenschaft auch als ein Weltall im Kleinen begreift. Das Fassliche entgeht, verwandelt sich, statt des Besitzes erlernt man den Bezug, und es entsteht eine Namenlosigkeit, die wieder bei Gott beginnen muss, um vollkommen und ohne Ausrede zu sein. Das Gefühlserlebnis tritt zurück hinter einer unendlichen Lust zu allem Fühlbaren ..., die Eigenschaften werden Gott, dem nicht mehr Sagbaren, abgenommen, fallen zurück an die Schöpfung, an Liebe und Tod ...[.] (B-HN, II, 292-93)

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<sup>52</sup> B-HN, II, 292 (letter of 23 February 1923).



This has sometimes been read as testimony to a diminishing sense of the centrality of God,<sup>53</sup> but to my mind it suggests the reverse. In 1923 Rilke recalls *Das Stundenbuch* and links his current thinking to what he expressed at the turn of the century, ‘dieser Aufstieg Gottes aus dem atmenden Herzen, davon sich der Himmel bedeckt, und sein Niederfall als Regen’ (B-HN, II, 292) – once more underlining the centrality of humankind rather than its periphery or dependence, and echoing the beautiful images of the hanging catkins and the falling rain at the end of the last of the *Duineser Elegien* (KA II, 234, ll. 106-13). Christ also appears in this letter to Jahr, initially as something being superseded by a profounder sense of God: ‘Mehr und mehr kommt das christliche Erlebnis außer Betracht; der uralte Gott überwiegt es unendlich’ – which he makes clear is because the Christian discourse of sin is an unnecessary ‘Umweg zu Gott’ (B-HN, II, 292). Here, without the explicitness that would be inappropriate for this addressee, he is echoing the section of *Der Brief des jungen Arbeiters* celebrating human sexuality and Christ’s role as ‘die starke innerlich lebende Brücke des Mittlers’ only makes sense if we do not deny that what separates us from God is not an ‘Abgrund’ to be avoided but one into which we must descend: ‘wo ihn [i.e. den Abgrund] einer erfährt, so steige er hinab und heule drin’. Rilke glosses, ‘Erst zu dem, dem auch der Abgrund ein Wohnort war, kehren die vorausgeschickten Himmel um, und alles tief und innig Hiesige, das die Kirche ans Jenseits veruntreut hat, kommt zurück; alle Engel entschließen sich, lobsingend zur Erde!’ (B-HN, II, 292).

This illuminates the reasons for which Christ himself is at the root of Rilke’s suspicion of religion. Rudolf Kassner famously reported a conversation with him on this topic held at Schloß Duino in June 1914:

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<sup>53</sup> See Ludwig Wenzler, ‘Rilkes Wege mit “Gott” – religionsphilosophisch betrachtet’, in *‘Gott’ in der Dichtung Rainer Maria Rilkes*, ed. by Fischer, pp. 439-73 (p. 469).

Unser Gespräch kam auf Christus. Und zwar auf die Figur Christi, des Gottmenschen und Mittlers mehr als auf den Leidenshelden der Evangelien. Was mir Rilke damals eröffnete, schien mir für ihn selber bedeutsam. Er wolle gar nicht, meinte er, einen Mittler zwischen sich und Gott, er vermöchte einen solchen auf keine Weise einzusehen; der Mittler würde ihn nur daran hindern, auf Gott einzugehen und sich mit Gott einzulassen, Christus sei ihm im Wege.<sup>54</sup>

This perhaps anticipates Rilke's exploration of the imagery of signs and pathways in *Der Brief* some years later. A decade and a half earlier even than the conversation with Kassner, however, in a diary entry for 4 October 1900, Rilke had described Christ as 'eine Gefahr' for young people, calling him 'der Allzunahe, der Verdeckter Gottes'.<sup>55</sup> On another occasion, in a moment of particularly vehement anti-Christianity, he uses the image of the telephone to evoke existential absence. He praises the prophet Mohammed for the directness of his contact with God; in contrast, and using a phrase that perhaps echoes Nietzsche's ironic 'Telefon des Jenseits' from *Zur Genealogie der Moral*,<sup>56</sup> Rilke calls Christ a telephone, a mere conduit 'zu dem einen Gott, mit dem sich so großartig reden läßt jeden Morgen, ohne das Telephon "Christus", in das fortwährend hineingerufen wird: *Holla, wer dort?*, und niemand antwortet'.<sup>57</sup> Given how much shouting accompanied telephony in the 1910s and 1920s – one

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<sup>54</sup> Rudolf Kassner, *Narciss, oder Mythos und Einbildungskraft* (Leipzig: Insel, 1928), p. 126.

<sup>55</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe und Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit, 1899-1902*, ed. by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Leipzig: Insel, 1931), p. 370.

<sup>56</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. by Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols (Munich: DTV, 1988), III: *Jenseits von Gut und Böse, Zur Genealogie der Moral*, p. 346.

<sup>57</sup> BW MTT, I, 246 (letter of 17 December 1912).

only has to think of the telephone episodes early in Kafka's *Das Schloß*, for example – the famous opening lines of the first of the *Duineser Elegien* take on the aspect less of the cry of a post-Romantic hero somewhere out in the wilderness than of an imagined telephone call. The question 'Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn aus der Engel Ordnungen?' (KA II, 201) expects the answer 'kein Anschluß unter dieser Nummer'.<sup>58</sup>

The call is not real, but Rilke *does* take the trouble to imagine it. As so often in Rilke an absence suggests a presence. The phrase 'wenn ich schrie' implies at least that one might *want* to call out to something transcendent. It is true that when he made his stipulations in case he should be mentally incapacitated by illness, attached to a letter to Frau Wunderly-Volkart in October 1925, Rilke insisted that the clergy be kept away: 'so bitte, ja *beschwöre* ich meine Freunde, jeden priesterlichen Beistand, der sich andrängen könnte, von mir fernzuhalten' (BW NWV II, 1192). This was not, as it had been for Luther, because these rituals were empty of significance, rather because they had too much significance of the wrong kind. At the moment when his soul was approaching 'das Offene', he wanted no mediation of any kind, no 'geistiger Zwischenhändler'. But he did want to be buried in a churchyard.

This essay does not aim to diminish the importance of Rilke's overt hostility to Christianity, to the Church and to Christ seen as a mediator. But it does seek to reassert the central presence of God in Rilke's writing, at all periods of his life, as a topic for renewed serious scholarly investigation. The overt presence of something called 'God' cannot be treated as incidental; it is not adequately accounted for as the transmutation of material from

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<sup>58</sup> A fuller context for this (not wholly ironic) suggestion can be found in my unpublished inaugural lecture for the University of Bristol, 'Only (Dis)Connect: Literary Telephony in European Modernism' (held on 25 March 2015 and accessible online at <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/pace/public-events/inaugural/2015/vilain.html>).

a religious tradition into something purely secular, metaphorical, analogical or symbolic; it is not merely a manifestation of a form of vague mysticism or the clothing in images of a particular philosophical outlook; and it is not simply the projection of the psychic make-up of the biographical Rilke. Without in any way intending to validate or even echo the various faith-based perspectives that dominated Rilke criticism in the 1920s and 1930s – but in the knowledge that this is a bold contention in the context of current and recent Rilke scholarship – I suggest that Rilke’s constant, even obsessive exploration of what it means to say ‘God’ and what the love of God might be are expressions of a circling about belief and faith that many would regard as a the normal condition of a modern believer, perhaps even of an early 20th-century believer.

Rilke clearly believed in God, in his own terms, eschewing the traditionally transcendental but acknowledging the importance of something well beyond the personal. His profound irritation with Christianity is an expression of frustration at the missed opportunity it represents for the exploitation of something integral to, and inherent in, human nature. God is not dead for Rilke, whatever his epoch might have wanted him to believe, and it would be lazy to relegate him to the category of post-Nietzschean neo-humanism. Rilke’s God is in some ways the manifestation of immanent human value, for without us He is irrelevant or impotent – although it is striking that for this to be true He needs also to be conceptualized as beyond and outside humanity. A combination of the gesture of ‘Gott zeigen’ in place of theology for Malte Laurids Brigge, of the imagined appeal to the Angel in the *Erste Elegie*, and of the Worker’s assertion ‘Hier ist der Engel, den es nicht giebt’ encapsulates this clearly. Mathematicians routinely work with imaginary numbers whose existence may be dubious but whose power is nonetheless very real. Archimedes is said to have asserted ‘δῶς μοι πᾶ στῶ καὶ τὰν γᾶν κινάσω’ (‘give me a place to stand and I will move the earth’), using a non-existent foothold in space to explain the potential power of the lever. Rilke himself, despite

his aversion to anonymous technological advance, is not averse to citing modern science to make his point: he explains to Ilse Jahr, ‘wo einmal Nähe war und Durchdringung, da spannen sich neue Fernen, so wie im Atom, das die neue Wissenschaft auch als ein Weltall im Kleinen begreift’ (B-HN, II, 292), articulating the important paradox that it takes a concept of the infinitely tiny to illuminate what the infinitely expansive might mean. This is what he means by ‘Bezug’.

My contention is that there is a powerful nostalgia for a meaningful divinity in Rilke’s work and that this was overestimated in the first few decades following his death and has been largely under-acknowledged or explained away since then. It is manifested in his unwillingness or inability to frame a concept of humanity without continual reference to a ‘God’, and in a continual appeal to an ideal of purity and perfection. This may sometimes be a nostalgia for faith – the faith perhaps that his obsessive mother wished to inculcate in him – but it is more complex than that. Rilke’s God sits at the Archimedean point, is the square root of minus one; he has a functional necessity without a real presence.

Das Faßliche entgeht, verwandelt sich, statt des Besitzes erlernt man den Bezug, und es entsteht eine Namenlosigkeit, die wieder bei Gott beginnen muß, um vollkommen und ohne Ausrede zu sein. Das Gefühlserlebnis tritt zurück hinter einer unendlichen Lust zu allem Fühlbaren . . . , die Eigenschaften werden Gott, dem nicht mehr Sagbaren, abgenommen, fallen zurück an die Schöpfung, an Liebe und Tod . . .[.] (B-HN, II, 292)